



CAIMAN CAPTURE IN VENEZUELA.

BY WINIFRED JONES.



IN the steamer *Venezuela*, bound for South America—some of us in search of health, some of sport more novel and exciting than is to be found in the States—it was the caiman and our probable adventures in his haunts which most engrossed our thoughts and

formed the basis of our speculations.

We were fortunate enough on board to meet a man who had been a pioneer

in the trackless wilds of the Orinoco Valley, and who was on his way back to that region in charge of a party of settlers from our Western States. This veteran entertained us with many a thrilling story of life in the jungle. We had all shot birds and deer before, some of us wild turkey and bear, and so the chief interest and novelty to which we looked forward was the hunting of the great crocodiles, which we were soon to see for the first time.

The South American caiman bears a closer resemblance to the crocodile of the Ganges than to the alligator of our Southern States. The skull of the caiman is larger and less flat than that of the alligator, the protuberances along



THE INDIAN VILLAGE OF SANTA ROSA.

the head and back are more marked, the teeth are set differently, and finally, the toes are more webbed, in accordance with habits almost exclusively aquatic.

"They're very clumsy on land," our pioneer friend remarked, "and so, if you see one coming for you, just wait till he 'most gets up to you, and then dodge to one side. It will take a whole acre lot to turn him around in, and before he's pointed at you again, you can get ready to dodge again, and just keep it up till you tire him out."

If, in the course of this little game of tag, the caiman did catch one, he was still reassuring. In such a case, while one or perhaps both legs were being mangled or neatly nipped off by the reptile, we were to dig our thumbs into his eyes and gouge them out. This would infallibly induce him to loose his hold. To prove this statement, he told us of a peon who, in walking close to the river's bank, had incautiously stepped into the open mouth of a caiman, and had, by pursuing these tactics, released himself minus one foot. He also gave us the comforting assurance that the caiman, if he caught a man, did not immediately devour him, but carefully buried him in the mud till he got tender. This indication that the caiman was a *bon vivant* did not increase our confidence in him.

It was with some secret tremors then, as well as pleasurable anticipation, that we disembarked at Curaçoa and took a smaller steamer for Maracaibo. In the States we had been told such grewsome tales of snakes, scorpions, centipedes, malaria and yellow fever, that our minds were prepared in advance for the worst that could befall.

Twenty-four hours' sail brought us to Maracaibo—a white city, unrelieved by foliage save the luxuriant fringe of cocoa palms bordering the lake shore, dazzling our Northern eyes with reflected rays of the tropic sunshine. Of Maracaibo, however, we brought away nothing but the pleasantest recollections, in spite of weather so hot that it was at midday well-nigh unendurable.

It was on a small side-wheel steamer, drawing but two and a half feet of water, with the rudest of accommodations on board, that we sailed away down the Lago de Maracaibo. The heat was intense, and those passengers on the *Los Andes* who were fortunate

enough to sleep on deck in hammocks had decidedly the best of it. Morning brought us to La Ceiba, on the southern shore of the lake. Here we disembarked and took a short run on the railroad into the country, returning at evening to the *Los Andes*. The next morning our boat left the lake and entered the Catatumbo River. This river, from its mouth to its junction at Encontrados with the Zulia River, is bordered for the most part by swamps well-nigh impassable, diversified here and there by little clearings occupied mostly by banana plantations. The rank growth of the trees, twined and entangled, would seem to the uninitiated a most appropriate lurking-place for snakes of all kinds; and at first shivers crept down our spines as we pictured ourselves lifted bodily from the deck of our boat and borne off encircled by the coils of a giant boa-constrictor. But we soon found how groundless were such fears, and, at the risk of having my veracity questioned, I will state here that none of our party even saw a snake in the whole course of our trip through Venezuela.

Though snakes were, apparently, wholly lacking to this jungle, its tangled depths were teeming with life of many sorts. Iguanas and gay-hued lizards ran in every direction, great butterflies of gorgeous hue fluttered through the air, parrots and paroquets flew above our heads, uttering discordant shrieks, blue herons and white cranes lazily flapped their great wings and sailed slowly by us or stood on the banks gravely regarding our progress. The trees were gay with many-hued orchids, looking, some of them, like creatures instinct with life, and monkeys of many different species climbed and swung and swayed among the branches. J—— shot one of the large red monkeys, hoping to get the skin, but its body fell into the depths of the swamp, where it could not be reached. These creatures are nearly as large as an Irish setter, with coats of the same shade of color and faces surrounded by bushy beards.

As the sun's rays illuminated this strange scene we caught our first glimpse of the caimans. Some were floating like black logs in the river (indeed, our unpracticed eyes could not distinguish them from logs, so gentle

are their motions in swimming and so nearly are their bodies submerged); others were sunning themselves on the banks, from whence they rolled into the water with a great splashing as our boat approached. Our rifles were soon at work, and we materially reduced the caiman population of that region, though occasionally some one of us would waste a shot on a log, and, of course, all bullets which did not strike square glanced off harmless from the thick and tough hide of the reptiles.

Swinging round a bend of the river, whose far stretches were edged with the pale legions of the *menons*, or false plantains, we saw what seemed to be an enormous caiman lying apparently asleep directly in the middle of the deep water where we must pass. The Captain slowed the engines and we crept up almost noiselessly, J— and D—, on each side of the bow, stood with rifles poised, ready to fire. Nearer we came, and we could see his great ugly body outlined in the water. Nearer, and we could see his cavernous eyes, but they were closed. At last, just as we seemed almost over him, he awoke and switched his mighty tail. Just then two rifle shots rang out, and as he began to churn the water into foam in his death struggle the boat passed over him. The last we saw was his whitish belly turned upward, as the river bore his ugly body away to the lake.

The old theory that one must shoot a crocodile in the eye in order to kill was proved fallacious. A bullet from a modern Winchester or Martini, if it strikes square above a vital spot, is almost certainly fatal. When wounded the creatures uttered a fearful bellowing, much like that of an enraged bull, and spun round and round, lashing the water furiously with their tails. The death agonies of these reptiles, however, left us quite unmoved. I had never been able to overcome my repugnance either to causing or witnessing the death of any warm-blooded creature, no matter how insignificant or small, but for these lurking evil things not one pang of pity disturbed my breast.

When we arrived at Encontrados, J—, wishing for a nearer view of the caiman, engaged a guide. This man, a tall, lithe Indian, with piercing eye and aquiline features, the ideal hunter in appearance, paddled J— about in a crude

dug-out canoe among the floating reptiles. J— afterward confessed that his sensations had been far from pleasant, as he realized that any one of those passive creatures, whose black noses dotted the water like buoys, could easily have overturned the little boat with a switch of its powerful tail, and thus have had the occupants at its mercy. He was not successful, either, in getting a good shot at any of them, as, sitting in the bottom of the boat, he was not sufficiently above the water-line to get a proper angle, and the bullets glanced off harmless from their armor plate.

The guide then proposed to show us the native method of trapping caiman. We were rowed some distance from the town; then, disembarking, we walked slowly along the river bank, our guide ahead, his bright eyes closely scanning the surface of the water. At last he stopped and exclaimed: "Caiman—caiman!" pointing to what looked like a group of floats lying at some distance in front of us. He bade us conceal ourselves in the brush near by and await results. Cutting an osier wand about a yard and a half in length, he fastened it by means of tough grass into the form of a circle, following its outline with a running noose of strong rope, fastened to the osier at short intervals by means of strips of short bark easily broken. The lower part of the hoop was then baited with offal from a sheep freshly killed. Divesting himself of most of his clothing, the Indian waded into the river until he reached a depth of four or five feet. He then secured the hoop to a stake driven into the mud of the river bed, arranging so as to leave the bait about two inches below the surface of the water. The trap being now ready, our hunter began to splash about noisily, ducking his head under the water occasionally and making bubbles rise as he imitated the sounds made by cattle in drinking. After a few moments given to these manœuvres, the long, irregular line of floats began to make a ripple in our direction. As they slowly advanced, a native woman came down to the shore opposite us with her arms full of soiled linen. She was barefooted, and, tucking up her skirts, she waded into the stream, and, dipping a piece of linen, began to beat it against a bat stone. The caimans saw and noted. The floats changed their direction, and

slowly moved toward the unconscious *lavandera*. Our shouts and gestures warned her of her danger, and she hastily scrambled out of the water, postponing her washing till some more auspicious time.

J— quoted here Kipling's "Ripple Song":

"Maiden, wait," the ripple saith,
 "Wait a while, for I am Death."
 "Where my lover calls I go—
 Shame it were to treat him coldly—
 'Twas a fish that circled so,
 Turning over boldly."

And again he quoted:

"Far away the ripple sped,
 Ripple, ripple running red."

Sympathetic shudders coursed down our backs as we thought of the danger the woman had just escaped.

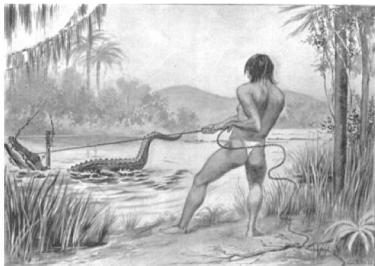
The disappointed caimans were again attracted by our guide's splashing, and at length one, thirteen feet long, came within a dozen yards of him, retreated a little and then again advanced. From

our hiding-place we could see his evil eye fixed on the human bait. Then, as the reptile made a quick start, the guide retreated to shallower water, still keeping up his splashing as though unconscious of the animal's approach. When the caiman came within about eight feet of the hoop, the Indian thought best to leave the water, as they are capable of rushing for a short distance with terrific speed through their native element. Advancing a little further the creature got scent of the offal bait, and in an instant more his jaws closed over it—his upper jaw within the rope and osier circle, his lower jaw below it. The noose was immediately jerked taut by our hunter, and, broken from the willow hoop, it inclosed the head tightly, catching fast in the upper teeth. The creature was then quickly pulled ashore by all hands, and dispatched by a bullet through the heart from one of our rifles.

On our return to Encontrados we watched the process of skinning our lat-



THE SETTING OF THE TRAP.



THE NOOSE WAS JERKED TAUT. (p. 494.)

est victim. The methods of the natives are simple and primitive in this as in all else that they do, and there is little attempt at improving on old methods. The crocodile's skin is split down the spine, as along that region the pelt is too thick and lumpy to be available for leather. The skin is then stripped off in one piece, salt and arsenic rubbed on the under side, and it is spread, raw surface down, on the hot ground to cure. We brought none of ours away, however, as we found them very bulky and evil-smelling, and it would have been more expensive in the long run than to buy skins already prepared.

The following day we left Encontrados and pushed on toward the Andes. We saw no more caiman after leaving the Zulia and Catatumbo rivers, though other game, such as peccary, fox, deer, wild turkey and smaller birds we found in abundance. Indeed, we found Venezuela a perfect sportsman's paradise, though I would never advise one who is not in good health to seek sport in the tropics, nor one to whom the luxuries of life seem a necessity. We all took daily doses of quinine during our travels in the interior, and only one of our party contracted the river fever—an acute and

most uncomfortable form of malaria. Quinine in large quantities is a necessary part of every sportsman's or traveler's outfit. If one observes certain necessary precautions he is not likely to be ill. Fruit should be eaten sparingly or not at all during the first month of one's stay in the country. Bathing out of doors or in a draught should not be indulged in, and the rays of the midday sun should be avoided.

The chief bugbears of the Northern traveler, snakes, scorpions and centipedes, were conspicuously absent from our route, though it is always well to be provided with ammonia in case of necessity. Indeed, the dry season, during which we were in South America, was probably our most efficient protection. In some of the old houses, I was told, scorpions and centipedes are found, though not where chickens or cats are kept, as they hunt and exterminate these pests.

The traveler who comes to South America with a rifle in his possession must be prepared to be viewed with suspicion, and to experience more or less difficulty in getting it through the custom house. This is owing to the fact that very few Venezuelans own rifles



ON THE BANKS OF THE GRITA RIVER.

and that such weapons are supposed to indicate incipient revolution. The sportsman must carry all his own ammunition with him, as he will be unable to find rifle cartridges anywhere in Venezuela and, except in Caracas and Maracaibo, there is not a store where shotgun shells can be purchased, although pistols and pistol cartridges can be found anywhere.

In spite of all these drawbacks and inconveniences, which I have stated without glossing over; in spite of the long and sometimes tedious journey and of some risk of health, the trip to Venezuela is one that will amply repay one in search of new sensations and weary of the languid sport of stocked club preserves. The stranger will find a country picturesquely old and primitive, yet

strangely new and untried, rich in resources and affording boundless opportunities to the capitalist and to the man of initiative power. In fact, this vast country is as certainly El Dorado to-day as it was in the days when Spanish galleons left those shores laden—if tradition tells us truly—with gold and treasure; but it is an El Dorado that pours out its treasures to honest enterprise, energy and thrift, not to the cavalier of fortune.

Sportsmen will find a welcome wherever they may go that will recompense them ten-fold for whatever inconveniences they may meet, and sport in abundance if they will seek out the right sources of information and take reasonable care of their health; remembering that they are in the tropics.



MARACAIBO.